

Joel Roberts Poinsett to Andrew Jackson, November 24, 1832, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

JOEL R. POINSETT TO JACKSON.

Charleston, November 24, 1832.

Dear Sir, According to my engagement I have visited and thoroughly examined the forts in this harbour, and will now proceed to give you an account of their situation. This duty should have been executed earlier but the weather has been such as to render it difficult to cross the bay until within these two days.

Fort Moultrie is in a very dilapidated state, The South western wall is cracked in such a manner as to endanger its fall if great guns were fired from the parapet over it. That part of the fort could not however well be attacked, and the wharves Capt'n Eliason proposes throwing out, at the same time that they will protect the works from the action of the currents will furnish a flank fire along the Curtain sea ward, which is very much required. The rear about which you enquire particularly has a regular work, two bastions connected by a curtain and the flank fires are good, when this is picketed it will be strong enough to resist such forces as can be brought against it here. The whole work is surrounded by houses, which to give it fair play in case of attack must come down. There is besides a sand hill about a hundred yards from the fort, which has been thrown up by the eddying winds, and is high enough to command the fort and large enough to hold four pieces of field artillery. A few rifle men on this hill would make the men uncomfortable in the fort. There are no platforms yet on the land side, and the guns about 60 of large calibre are not mounted, indeed there are no carriages to mount them on. These could be made here of

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Cypress, a very durable wood that abounds with us. This fort would require 4 or 500 men and when put in order might defy all the Militia of the State.

At fort Johnson there are no works at all except a Martello tower, which being upon the land of the State ought to be pulled down for it commands the buildings belonging to the government. Both Fort Moultrie and Fort Johnson must be regarded as most important points for the defence of this harbour and ought to be preserved most carefully. At both positions Break Waters are required to secure the works from the action of the tides and currents and might be constructed by sinking hulks at the proper points. The most important work is the one projected by General Bernard and now in progress; but that would be inefficient without the forts on Sullivan's and James Islands. This work is just appearing above water and I think ought to be driven on as rapidly as may be for at a crisis like this the possession of such a position would render us very secure. I have conversed with Captn. Eliason on the subject and am induced to believe, that a small steam boat would facilitate his operations very considerably and prove in the end a great saving of money. The small vessels now employed in the transportation of Stone in the harbour are frequently detained for days together by calms and high winds and a great many more men are necessarily employed upon them, than would be required to manage a Steam boat towing properly constructed stone boats, which would discharge themselves.

Castel Pinckney is in fine order. The Armament Consists of 8–24 pounders 1–10 inch Mortar 2–12 pounders and 2–6 ditto. It is situated on a marshy Island a mile from the city and occupies the only spot of solid earth the Island contains. It could only be attacked in the rear by a flotilla in hog Island channel. By a reference to the survey of Major Bache, which is in the department you will see how it is exposed to such an attack. There are no works in the rear, as all the defences are Seaward and Captn. Saunders has placed two field pieces mounted on travelling carriages outside of the Castle, on the small esplanade in the rear of it. I should think some temporary work ought to be thrown up in the rear capable of mounting two heavy guns. In the present state of the works in this harbour Castle Pinckney is the only place where the custom house could be established with

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safety and upon consulting with Capt. Eliason I find that two buildings might be erected to serve for stores and accommodations for the revenue officers, which would materially strengthen the works. To protect the works from insult if not from danger there ought to be a small floating force in the harbour—one schooner or a sloop of war would be sufficient. Gun boats or smaller vessels are exposed, to be boarded and taken by a superiour force of resolute men. You will perceive by a reference to the survey, that such a force would render it impracticable for an enemy to attack the either fort Moultrie or Castle Pinckney—the Vessel of war ought to be furnished with an additional number of boats capable of bearing small cannon.

I am, Dear Sir, respectfully

I have submitted this letter to Col. Drayton. He approves of the suggestions it contains; but says, that it might be expedient to have two sloops of war in the harbour in the event of a simultaneous attack being made upon Castle Pinckney and fort Moultrie. In that case one sloop of war and one schooner is the force I would recommend, the latter being rather more manageable in passing in and out of our Harbour.